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# Observations

ON

## THE INDIAN LANGUAGE,

BY

EXPERIENCE MAYHEW, A.M.

Preacher of the Gospel to the Indians of Martha's  
Vineyard in New England, in 1722.

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NOW PUBLISHED FROM THE ORIGINAL MS. BY

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SOCIETY, AND CORRESPONDING MEMBER OF THE MAINE HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

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## LETTER OF EXPERIENCE MAYHEW, 1722, ON THE INDIAN LANGUAGE.

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**T**HE writer of this letter was of the fourth descent from the Worshipful Thomas Mayhew, Esquire, patentee and governor of Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, and the Elizabeth Islands, under a title from the Earl of Stirling in 1641.

Combining the influence of proprietorship and civil station with excellence of christian character and life, the family, through several generations, exerted a controlling influence within their domain. But they are most endeared to us by their generous self-devotion to the noble design of civilizing and christianizing the Indians, of whom there were several thousands within their proprietary. It is delightful to find the venerable Eliot and the youthful Cotton in hearty fellowship and personal coöperation with them in their blessed labors.

The Rev. John Mayhew, "who fell not short," says Prince,<sup>1</sup> "either of the eminent genius or piety of his excellent progenitors," lost his father in childhood in 1657, but had "the benefit of his grandfather, the Governor's, wise instruction and his father's library." When a very young man he well understood the language of the

<sup>1</sup> Appendix to Mayhew's Indian Converts, 1727.



Indians, and was able to discourse freely with them, and to preach and pray with them with the greatest readiness. His son, Experience, the writer of this letter now first published, when in the eighth year of his age, went with him to visit the governor in his last illness in 1681, and the youth, in later life, "well remembered his great-grandfather's calling him to his bedside and laying his hands on his head and blessing him in the name of the Lord."

Thus Mr. Mayhew's ancestry and position furnished an hereditary interest in the apostolic mission to the Indian, and nobly, meekly, did he obey the calling. He says that his "grandfather composed a large and excellent Catechism for the Indians of that Island, agreeable unto their own dialect;" his father was in youth as much at home in the Indian tongue as in his own; and being himself in childhood a play-mate with the Indian children, he says, "I learnt the Indian language by rote, as I did my mother tongue, and not by studying the rules of it as the Lattin tongue is comonly learned."

Mr. Gallatin, in his letter to George Folsom, Esq., accounts for the great difference in the orthography of those who have collected vocabularies, as arising from the native languages of the writers, and that it is almost sufficient in that respect to note whether he was an Englishman, a German, Frenchman, &c., and from the difficulty of expressing the guttural sounds and nasal vowels of the Indian speech.<sup>2</sup> In this respect the remarks of Mr. Mayhew are of peculiar interest from his familiarity with the Indians from childhood, learning by the ear, and catching their cadences and modulations while the organs of speech were flexible and delicate, and could be trained to the nicer differences not to be acquired or even detected in maturer life. We are persuaded that information from so high an authority will be welcome to the ethnologist, especially in view of Mr. Gallatin's suggestion that "it is perhaps less in dictionaries than by an investigation of grammatical forms and structure,

<sup>2</sup> Trans. of Am. Ant. Soc., vol. ii. 4, 5.

that we must study the philosophy of language and the various ways in which man has applied his faculties to that object."

Mr. Gallatin further remarks that "the venerable Eliot had in his Grammar, published in 1666, exhibited the most prominent features of the Massachusetts dialect." Mr. Mayhew was familiar with this, and the printed treatises to the year of his writing, 1722, and this gives peculiar force to his concluding observation that "the Indian language may seem otherwise than good and regular, is, as I judge, because there is yet no good Gramer made for it, nor are the rules of it fully understood."

Judge Paul Dudley, F.R.S., to whom the letter is addressed, an accomplished man, probably intended to make the information derived from Mayhew the basis of an article for the Transactions of the Royal Society, and it certainly equals in interest and scientific value any of his contributions published by that association.

Chilmark March 20<sup>th</sup> 1721-22.

Honorable Sir,

Yours of January y<sup>e</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> came safe to my hand ; but the distressed condition of my family since I received it, together with other Incumbrances, and necessary Avocations, (and of Late the want of a convenient opertunity,) have hindered me from sending you an answer till now ; other wise I must have owned myself inexcusable. The Feaver that goes about among us, and of which several have died, came into my family on January y<sup>e</sup> 1<sup>st</sup>, since which time five of my children, and 2 Servants have been vissited with it, two of y<sup>e</sup> children, in appearance nigh unto death ; besides my Wife who died March y<sup>e</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup>, and an Infant born alive y<sup>e</sup> night before. But now being in hopes of an opertunity spedily to send to you, I am obliged to Shew my willingness to perform what you desire of me.

And in y<sup>e</sup> first place as to what you desire respecting the *Lord's Prayer*, I am obliged to tell you, That the Martha's Vineyard Indian Dialect, and that of Natick, according unto w<sup>ch</sup> last Mr. Eliot translated the Indian Bible, are so very much a Like, that without a very Critical Observation,

you would not see y<sup>e</sup> difference, should I send you A Translation of y<sup>e</sup> Lord's Prayer according to y<sup>e</sup> Dialect, by the Indians here vsed; and therefore y<sup>e</sup> doing of it would not at all answer y<sup>e</sup> End you aim at. Indeed the difference was something greater than now it is, before our Indians had the vse of y<sup>e</sup> Bible and other Books translated by *Mr. Eliot*,<sup>3</sup> but since that the most of y<sup>e</sup> Little differences that were betwixt y<sup>m</sup>, have been happily Lost, and our Indians Speak, but especially write much as those of Natick do. To Speak y<sup>e</sup> truth I think most of y<sup>e</sup> Indians, not to say all of y<sup>m</sup>, betwixt Canada, and New-Spain, inclusively, do speak what was Originally one and y<sup>e</sup> same Language; how different soever their Several Dialects may now appear to be. As for those of Canada I am well assured, that their words are many of y<sup>m</sup> the same that are here vsed, and I think their way of declineing and compounding of words is the same also; And a few years agoe I discoursed with an Indian that came from South Carolina, and found that I understood several of his Indian words. Having also formerly taken a Little notice of that specimen of y<sup>e</sup> Mexican Indian Language w<sup>ch</sup> *Gage* has given us, I thought I could Easily perceive that their way of Compounding and declineing of words was very much Like that vsed by our Indians.<sup>4</sup> Let me add that when a few years agoe I vissited

<sup>3</sup> Roger Williams, 1643, instances "the great varietie of their Dialects, within thirtie or fortie miles of each other," by the word "Anum, A Dog.

Anum,	The Cowweset	} Dialect.
Ayim,	The Narriganset	
Arum,	The Quannippiuk	
Alum,	The Neepmuck	

So that although some pronounce not L nor R, yet it is the most proper Dialect of other places, contrary to many reports." Rhode Island Hist. Colls., i. 96.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Williams, in his "Key" to the Narraganset Dialect, 1643, says "it is most Spoken," and that "there is a mixture of this Language North and South, from the place of my abode, about six hundred miles; yet within the two hundred miles where ever English dwel betweene the French and Dutch Plantations, their Dialects doe exceedingly differ; yet not so, but (within that compasse) a man may by this helpe [Key], converse with thousands of Natives all over the Country." Rhode Isl. Hist. Coll., i. 18, 25; also Gookin, 1674, says "they use the same language, only with some difference in the expressions, as they differ in several countries in England yet so as they can well understand each other." Mass. Hist. Coll., i. 149; and, 1836, Mr. Gallatin, Mr. Du Ponceau, Mr. Pickering and others, are of opinion "that all the languages, not only of our own Indians, but of the native inhabitants of America from the Arctic Ocean to Cape Horn, have, as far as they have been investigated, a distinct character common to all." Gallatin's Letter to Folsom, Am. Ant. Soc., ii. 5, 142; so Jonathan Edwards in 1788, *ibid.* 35. See also Samuel F. Haven's Archaeology of the U. S., Smithsonian Contributions, 1855, 55-72.

the Indians of Connecticut Coloney, I took particular notice of the dialect by them vsed, and tho I found that there was so much difference betwixt theirs and that vsed among us, that I could not well understand their discourses and they much Less understand mine, which obliged me to make vse of an Interpreter, yet I thought the difference was not so great, but that if I had continued there a few months I could have attained to speake inteligably in their dialect. However since these differ more from the Natick Indians than those of the vinyard do; I will here Send you a Translation of the Lord's Prayer according to the Dialect by y<sup>m</sup> vsed, having by the help of my Interpreter translated it while I was Among y<sup>m</sup>, as it here followeth, viz.

The y<sup>e</sup> Lord's Prayer according to y<sup>e</sup> Dialect of y<sup>e</sup> [Praying Indians?] Nooskun Onkkonwe-Kesukeek weyetuppatameyage Koowesoosoonk kukkuttassootumooonk peāmooutch Koowekontamooonk eyage yeatai Okee oiohktai Onkkouwe Kesukkuk Mesunnan eyeu Kesukohk Asekesukohkish Nupputhekqunnekonum. Quah ohquantamiunna Nummattompauwonkanunonash, nānuk oi Ohquantamoueg Kehehah punniqueoquk. Quah akque eassunnan Mickemwetooonkanuk wepe pokquassunnan wutche Matchetuk. Newutche Kuttike Kuttessootumooonk Mekekooonk quah Kunnrontiatamooonk, Micheme quah Micheme. Amen.

I have seen, and once had, but can not now find, A catechism, composed by *M<sup>r</sup> Peirson* of Connecticut, agreable to the Dialect of the Indians in those parts, and more different from y<sup>t</sup> vsed by our Indians than that in the Lord's Prayer here above written. It is possible Judge Sewall<sup>5</sup> can help you to it.

My Grand Father in his time composed a large and Excellent Catechism for the Indians of this Island, agreable unto their own Dialect; but not being printed the Original is, I think, utterly lost, and there only remains of it, about 40 pages in Octavo, transcribed as I suppose, by some Indian after his Death; but this goes not so far as to have the Lord's Prayer in it, else I would have sent it to you.

<sup>5</sup> This excellent man, first in every good work, was zealously interested for the Indians. Cotton Mather, in his "Life of the Apostle Eliot," 1691, p. 116, says, "ought particularly to mention that learned pious and charitable gentleman, the worshipful Samuel Sewall Esq. who at his own charge built a meeting house for one of the Indian Congregations, and gave those Indians cause to pray for him under that character. He loveth our nation, for he hath built us a synagogue."

Whereas you desire some account, of the Peculiarities & Beauties of the Indian Language, and wherein they agre or differ from y<sup>e</sup> Europeans, I must, sir, confess to you, That I learnt the Indian Language by Rote, as I did my mother Tongue, and not by Studying the Rules of it as the Lattin Tongue is comonly Learned, besides, as you know I am no Gramarian and therefore shall not be so able to answer your desire, as to this Article in your Letter, as perhaps some others would have been. However, that I may shew My willingness to do what I can, I shall present you with a few observations on y<sup>e</sup> Language under consideration, leaving it with your hon<sup>r</sup> to compare the same with the Languages of Europe, being myself unskilled in y<sup>m</sup>. I shall then observe,

1. That all the articulate soundes vsed by the Indians in these Parts, may be spelt with several Letters fewer, than are vsed by y<sup>e</sup> English; for I know of no word in the proper dialect of y<sup>e</sup> Indians of this Island, but what may be very well written without any of these seaven Consonants, viz. b, d, f, g, l, r, x. Indeed some of these are frequently to be seen in our Indian books<sup>6</sup> but in words that are purely Indian, I think unnecessarily: In words derived from the English they are frequently needed.

2. That The Indian vowels are the same with y<sup>e</sup> English, save that y is never with y<sup>m</sup> vsed as a Vowel, and that o is frequently pronounced through the Nose, much as one would pronounce it with y<sup>e</sup> Mouth close shut, thus it is sounded twice in the word ôômuk, the womb, and when it is so sounded we write it as in the example given: yea there is one word that has no other Letter but such a vowel ô unless it should be thought needful to have two of y<sup>m</sup> for the drawing out of sound a Litle longer. In English y<sup>e</sup> word is yea or yes; but there being an other Indian word of y<sup>e</sup> same signification<sup>7</sup> viz *nux* as it is comonly writen, but should rather be *nukkies* in two sillables, the former is scarce ever vsed in writeing.

3. That Diphthongs or Duble sounds are of very frequent vse in the Indian Language as ai, au, ei, ee, eu, eau, oi, oo, oo. Especially oo diphthong is of most frequent vse, there being often two of them togethar in the

<sup>6</sup> Mather, 1691, said, "There is a letter or two of our Alphabet, which the Indians never had in theirs, . . . there can scarce be found an R in their language: save that the Indians to the Northward, who have a peculiar Dialect, pronounce the R where an N is pronounced by our Indians." Life of Eliot, 85; see also note <sup>3</sup> above.

<sup>7</sup> Roger Williams says, "They have five or six words sometimes for one thing." Rh. I. Hist. Coll., i. 26.

same word, & in one word that I think of, two oo's Joyned with y<sup>m</sup>; thus, *Wesketompo oo oo og*. They are men.

4. That Some Indian words have so many consonants sounded in one and the same Sillible as render the word some what difficult to pronounce, as in this word *Ahquehuhkq*, Let him alone.

5. That In The Indian Language there are so few, if any proper participles that it is unnecessary to reckon the Participle as one Part of their Language; M<sup>r</sup> Eliot therefore left it out of his *Indian Gramer begun*: but why he also left out the Preposition I confess I do not understand. That there are not w<sup>h</sup>standing, according to him Seaven parts of Speech is because he makes the Nown Adjective a distinct part of Speech, and calls it the *Adnown*, which unto me seems fair, because a Nown Adjective seems to bear the same Relation to y<sup>e</sup> Substantive, as the Adverb does unto y<sup>e</sup> Verb.

6. That the Indian pronoun is not declined, or varied, except when it is vsed in composition with other words or parts of Speech, and then *I Neen* is varied into *nut*, *noo*, *nun*, *Thou* into *kut*, *koo*, *kun*, &c. So I run is in Indian *nukquokqueem*. My son *nunnamon* [In first mentioning the *Pronoun* I follow m<sup>r</sup> Eliot].

7. That the variations of Nouns is not by Genders or Cases as in some other Languages; but, on other accounts as the Numbers, Singular and Plural: Their Nature whether animate or inanimate; Their Magnitude great or small; Their being in present existance or being past and gon; Also when a Noun follows a Verb Transitive as He made; it is differently formed from what the thing is other wise called, and alwayes ends in *ah* or *oh*. Likewise when a Noun whether singular or plural has any of these signs accompanying of it, viz. In, with, to, from, above, below, on this side, on y<sup>t</sup> side, it hath its ending in *ut*, or *at*, as my hand is, *nun-nitckek*, but *into my hand* is *nunnitckekanut*, and from me is *wutch nokkokot*.

8. That the noun adjective or Adnown is declined as well as the Noun Substantive unto which it relateth, I mean y<sup>t</sup> it commonly is so, as white Spoken of a Living creature is *wompesoo* but spoken of an Inanimate thing is *wompi*.

9. Respecting Verbes several things may be observed, as (1) There is no compleat and intire word for y<sup>e</sup> verb substantive as *am*, *art*, is &c. In Indian if a thing be asserted to exist, the way this is done is by adding to the Noun or its relative pronoun a silable or two that have the Nature or

